

## Correspondence.

## ARCHITECTURAL COMPETITION.

SIR,—I am induced to offer a few remarks on the important but almost thread-bare subject of architectural competition, in consequence of seeing the late discussion in your pages about the Derby affair.

Competitions generally give rise to a scene of confusion, bickering, and ill will, either in consequence of the partial decision of the committee appointed to examine the designs, or it is to be attributed to the malice of those architects, who, disappointed in their hopes, strenuously endeavour to ridicule the committee, or ascribe to the successful competitor a line of conduct, which, in most cases, they know full well would have been followed by themselves, had they the opportunity. In proof of this, I would draw the attention of your readers to the letter of "J," at page 365 of *THE BUILDER*, where, after laudably exposing the "infamous system of sham competition" in reference to Mr. Dunsbury, and lamenting that the expense to which architects are obliged to go, should be so misapplied, very unwittingly lets out the secret that he sometimes sends in designs to competitions, relying on his strong interest with the committee; very truly; "In the vain hope of standing on their merits;" certainly a most consoling reflection for those architects who may have been duped by him; and a confession which just amounts to the fact, that when he happens to have an opportunity of canvassing the committee beforehand, he is one of those who seldom neglect such an opportunity, and therefore "J" must be content to rank no higher in the matter of honour than Mr. Dunsbury. I allude to this as a sample of what generally follows a competition, and to warn your readers of putting too much confidence in such angry communications.

But to return to the subject of competitions: it will be my endeavour to shew the inability of the present methods towards procuring a correct and just decision, and then to throw out a hint or two for the formation of a better system. The persons generally appointed to constitute a committee for inspecting the designs, are persons of local influence, and of a very respectable station in society, but who from their habits of life, know nothing, or at most very little, of the principles of architecture; these generally manage to get a neighbouring builder with them of some influence, who is generally connected with a local architect; the builder with the aid of a few technicalities in his conversation, and an abundant flow of high-sounding terms, makes a sensation on his fellow-committee men, who are well aware of their ignorance on the subject, and by this means finds little difficulty in persuading the committee to decide on the marked design. This is one of the present modes adopted; and though, in some cases, the detail and circumstances may differ, yet it rarely happens that there is not some hidden current at work, which by choosing the architect beforehand, becomes a source of gross injustice to the rest of the competitors. Such a method cannot be defended on any grounds; it fosters bad taste, and proves a hot-bed for the growth of angry feeling; the very idea of such a committee sitting down to give an opinion on fifty or sixty elaborate designs on a subject, with which many of them are totally unacquainted, is ludicrous, but it is a fact which stares us in the face every week in the year. It would be wasting your valuable space to dilate any further on a subject which is at once so palpably unjust and defective; I shall, therefore, proceed to notice another mode, which though far superior to the last one, fails in many instances of procuring a correct decision; it is when the committee appoint an architect to examine the designs, and give his opinion thereon. Though it is hardly possible for an architect to err so far from the mark as a committee might, yet most architects have certain prejudices in regard to styles, &c., which would operate fatally against those who happened to differ from them; at the same time a serious objection is, that it leaves room for jobbing, it being possible for an architect to have his opinion warped, as to suit a friend's interest. Having thus expressed my hostility to the two methods most commonly adopted, I shall now describe the outline of a plan, which, I think, would effectually prevent any under-handed work

while, at the same time, it ensures the best and most correct opinion on the designs:—it is, to make the competing architects the judges. This might easily be done by the committee appointed meeting first to examine the designs, and then by advertisement, notify to the competitors that, on a certain day, the designs would be open for their inspection; each architect would then give in his opinion in writing to the committee (of course omitting his own design); and the premium would be awarded to the design having the majority. It would rest with the committee either to approve or reject a design, with such a recommendation. This method possesses many great advantages in its favour; the numbers of the architects, and their being interested parties, would effectually preclude all attempts at making a job of it: the architects being of all persons best acquainted with the peculiarities of the proposed building, would ensure a correct decision; and the present expensive method of sending in designs with landscapes drawn by artists, and other superfluities, would be needless; as architects are not likely to give much attention to a design because the trees in the foreground are painted so naturally, or an Italian sky is staring them in the face. This last effect would do good, in purging competitions of the immense number of trashy designs usually sent in, whose sole merit is having a fine landscape, painted so as to bewilder the judgments of the committee; and therefore might induce architects to pay more attention to the design, and less to the picture.

There is one objection I would name, which, however, is soon answered; about the expense of travelling: if architects can afford to pay 10*l.* or 15*l.* to ornament designs, on the bare possibility of obtaining a premium under the present uncertain mode of committees, I certainly think they can afford to pay the same for travelling expenses; with the prospect of having a correct judgment passed on the designs. This plan will, no doubt, meet with opposition from those who are so fond of interest with committees, &c.; but it would tend to draw out genuine talent in young architects, and would raise the present low state of architecture in the country; and, if in some details it is defective, at all events, it is worth a trial. Before I conclude, I would say a few words on the premiums generally offered: it is very usual to see an advertisement for a proposed building costing 1,500*l.*, and one magnificent premium of 10 guineas offered: this needs little comment, and it surprises me to see fifty or sixty designs sent in, when the premium, if obtained, will not pay necessary expenses. Architects who send in designs to such competitions deserve to be made the dupes of some favoured professional, who very comfortably takes a hint or two gratis from the other designs, when they happen to suit his purpose. This, perhaps, may solve the question so often asked, how it is that designs executed, reasonable in many features designs rejected? Though this is bad enough, it is sometimes surpassed, when a committee inform the architects that fortunate competitor will only have the honour of superintending the building,—generous committee! This, perhaps, may be the reason why architects are so fond of dressing up their designs in splendid coats, that they may shew they have a due sense of the eye-dazzling and brain-bewildering liberality of the committee; such conduct ought never to be defended. Most unreasonable is it to suppose that architects are to risk time and money for the charge of superintending a building perhaps 100 miles from home; and the most strange part of the business is, that so many architects send in designs with such an insult in their face. For any competition not less than two premiums should be awarded, and they should always bear a fair proportion to the cost of the building, so as to sufficiently recompense an architect for the necessary loss of time and money; also architects should always, when practicable, carry into execution their own designs: no other person can imbibe the spirit of the designer; and any faults could then be laid on the shoulders of the proper person. I will now conclude by observing, that it is in the power of architects, seconded by the efforts of *THE BUILDER* and other journals, to amend existing grievances, and that while men of talent and influence lend themselves to conduct so mean and despicable, and while the present imbecile method of judging by committee

continues, the efforts of the few must be directed to exposure and shame; then, and not till then, will architecture be calculated to raise the minds of men: at the present time the sole object seems to be, how they may soonest fill their purses. I must make the importance of the subject an apology for the length of this communication.

I remain, your obedient servant,

SCRUTATOR.

London, August 21st, 1844.

## THE NEW ROYAL EXCHANGE.

ON Saturday last workmen commenced placing the bells in the belfry of the tower of the New Royal Exchange, of which there are to be fifteen. There are seven of them on the ground, which weigh above 30 cwt. The bell which is the lightest weighs 4 cwt. and 26 lbs. This is B flat, and the chord bell to it weighs 6 cwt. and 27 lbs. The whole of the bells will weigh above 80 cwt., and will be at the Exchange in the course of the next week. The contractor for them, Mr. Mears, will superintend the placing of them. It is expected that they will be in their several positions in the course of ten days. The mechanism of the clock will then be put up. The stone masons have begun to lay down the flag-stones outside the building, under the direction of Mr. Collingshaw, the superintendent of the works. The first stone being laid down opposite the Wellington testimonial. The operation will be finished in about three weeks, by which time the external front of this structure will have been cleaned down. It is expected that about the middle of October the merchants will be able to be admitted for the transaction of business.

## Miscellaneous.

**METROPOLITAN IMPROVEMENTS.**—Between Holborn and Oxford-street the line of the new street is in a state of considerable forwardness. The vaults for the houses on either side of the way are completed, and the width of the thoroughfare is now marked out; through the whole distance a sewer, about 15 feet below the surface, is being formed, and is nearly half completed. When the whole length is finished (which is now expected to be in the course of three or four weeks), there will be a direct communication between Holborn and Oxford-street for foot passengers. Many now take this course, avoiding the circuitous way by St. Giles's Church. While digging the ground for the vault on the site which was formerly the area of the Rookery, the workmen met with some curious remains. Outside the walls, where stood the hospital for lepers, was found the root of a vine, which is stated to have been celebrated for its fruit, and which was in good condition. Several pieces of marble slabs were also taken out of the ruins of the above hospital, as also a marble slab with the following inscription on it:—"Buckridge-street, 1655." It is not generally known that this street was built shortly after the fire of London, and out of some of the materials, which were publicly sold after that disastrous calamity. A quantity of wood excavated here (some of which is oak), was discovered to be in a charred state. Several of the above articles are in the possession of the landlord of the Buckridge Arms, which is the only house remaining of that neighbourhood.

**MEDALS OF CATHEDRALS.**—Mr. Joseph Davis, of Birmingham, is now issuing a series of very beautiful medals illustrative of the Cathedrals of this country. The medals are of a size sufficient to afford accurate and striking views of these glorious temples, and those which we have seen are executed with much taste and ability. The series is brought out under the patronage of Prince Albert and the chief dignitaries of the church.

A very interesting relic, a gold coin, in fine preservation, was found a short time since by a woman in a turnip field, close to the ruins of Caister, near Lakenham. The coin bears date during the reign of Nero, and contains a fine impression of the Roman monarch. It is about three times as thick, but not so large, in circumference as a half-sovereign—weighs four penny-weights, and is composed of the purest gold. It was sold to Mr. Rossi, in the Market Place, and was the first gold coin remembered to have been found at Caister.